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House Votes to Widen Religious Insurance Exemption

Bill Is One of Three That Would Modify Affordable Care Act

By Jennifer Corbett Dooren

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The House on Tuesday approved three bills that would modify the Affordable Care Act including one that would expand religious exemption requirements in the law.

The measures were all approved with broad bipartisan support, marking a departure from most prior measures brought up in the House that would have either partly or fully repealed the 2010 federal health law. The measures would have to clear the Democratic-controlled Senate before becoming law, and prospects for action there weren't clear, according to senior Democratic aides.

One bill by Rep. Aaron Schock, (R., Ill.), would allow consumers with "sincerely held religious beliefs" against using conventional medical care to be exempt from a requirement under the health law that requires individuals to carry health insurance or pay a fine. The bill is largely aimed at Christian Scientists who had been pressing for a change.

The health law already contains a religious exemption provision, but Mr. Schock said it is narrowly crafted and "it is just not clear enough." Mr. Schock said he's received many letters from constituents who are Christian Scientists who were concerned they wouldn't be exempt from the law. Many Christian Scientists don't seek traditional medical care and use prayer to address health concerns although the church doesn't specifically ban it, according to a spokeswoman for the church.

Mr. Schock's bill was passed with a voice-vote, a procedure reserved for legislations expected to pass by a wide margin. Still, some Democrats, including Rep. [Henry Waxman](#), (D., Calif.), said they opposed the measure because it was too broad and potentially would allow anyone to claim a religious exemption.

Mr. Schock said the bill isn't meant to be a large expansion of the number of people eligible to claim a religious exemption and includes a provision that would require people to pay a fine if they do seek medical treatment during the year.

"Our members very much appreciate consideration of this modest, technical modification to the religious conscience exemption from the individual mandate in the Affordable Care Act," Sharon McElory, media manager for The First Church of Christ, Scientist, said in a statement. "The way the law reads now, the exemption applies only to the Amish and Old Order Mennonites." Those groups generally don't use other government programs such as Medicare or Social Security, according to House aides.

Under current law, Americans have until March 31 to get health insurance before they could face what's called the individual mandate tax penalty. The penalty for 2014 is \$95 or 1% of taxable income, whichever is greater, and it rises in subsequent years. The penalty won't be

paid until people file their 2014 taxes early next year. There are religious and certain hardship exemptions built into the law that would allow people to escape the penalty.

The second bill that passed, sponsored by Rep. Rodney Davis, (R., Ill.), is meant to create incentives for employers to hire veterans and would allow anyone already covered by a Department of Defense insurance program to not be counted as a full-time employee under the health law. That bill passed with a vote of 406 to 1.

A third bill by Rep. Lou Barletta, (R., Pa.), would make sure that volunteer firefighters and emergency responders aren't counted as full-time employees and was unanimously approved. In February, the Obama administration finalized a rule that would exempt volunteer emergency responders from the health law, but lawmakers said legislation would make sure future regulations involving such volunteers didn't change.

—Kristina Peterson contributed to this article.